
FIRST PERFORMANCES

Singapore, Esplanade Concert Hall: Stucky's 'Spirit Voices'

When Lan Shui, Music Director of the Singapore Symphony, began the 14–15 November 2003 pair of concerts with Joan Tower's first *Fanfare for the Uncommon Woman*, he specifically had in mind who would follow: Evelyn Glennie, who entered wearing a black lace blouse with solid black breast-plate, black lace cape, and hot, tight, flaming red sequined slacks with a large bare metal cross around her neck. I exclaimed, 'Now that's the kind of priest I'd like in my church!'

Except for spotlights on soloist and conductor, the stage was darkened to a deep red as Glennie glided toward a set of Chinese opera gongs, temple blocks, log drum, and tam-tams and shrieked, 'Yoooo-EEEE!' with cries interrupted by slashes at the instruments, as if raising the mythical gods of Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand from the dead in a raucous incantation. It was what Steven Stucky describes as the cadenza opening to this 25-minute, seven-movement work, which is played without breaks.

The second 'vision' is inspired by a weeping Scottish wraith who haunts desolate lakes where she washes the blood-stained clothes of fallen warriors. Glennie pulled a large bow against edges of vibraphone, cymbals, and tam tams, while solo cello, brass, and winds drew out their haunting sounds not just left and right but back- and upstage, a three-dimensional orchestral effect that Shui especially relished.

In the third movement, Welsh elves from Queen Mab's court produce a biting, snappy *Scarbo*-like effect as marimba and xylophone chattered with piccolo and flute. It was the one moment in the work where, at least in this hall, the orchestra was under-balanced with the soloist.

The fourth vision, inspired by the Maori's Long Shark (or Milky Way) who foretells the coming of day, belies Stucky's essential orchestral palette, almost an avant-garde version of Ravel, essentially French with its delicate transparency and, above all, atmospheric. Were those muted brass off-stage? No, they're a pair of flutes! And you'd swear, especially in the Esplanade's highly reverberant, bright, practically tactile acoustics, that that hushed vibraphone was amplified, but it wasn't.

The fifth movement, 'Coyote', from the American Indian tradition, serves up another hallmark Stucky sound, a gorgeously melancholic French horn solo, which functions as transition to the work's crisis point, inspired by evil Japanese goblins who drive their victims insane. This sixth vision features a further essential Stucky characteristic, a really tight, rhythmically thrilling ostinato which, with its 5/4 meter, brass, and pounding cowbell, builds to a ritualistic crescendo and a shattering climax.

As the resonance dissipates, a chorale-type finale emerges, inspired by the Great Spirit in American Indian tradition, who is in the very air we breathe. After Glennie gently tapped first two small gongs and then two huge tam-tams, all pitched from treble to bass, a fading chamber orchestra replied. It's a pattern that decrescendos to an ethereal farewell. In fact, Glennie ended not with the music itself but by standing point still, hammer suspended, for 30 to 45 seconds of total silence, as if all the spirits of the world have been returned to sleep, the world is once more quiet, and prayer in some form pervades all. While neither Stucky nor Glennie would take the bait when I mentioned the religious effect of the work, her very visuals or his very titles simply won't let them off the hook.

This essentially atmospheric work was assisted enormously by Glennie's percussion technician, James Wilson, who designed a constantly changing palette of colored lights, possible with the theatre's state-of-the-art facilities. They were so superbly and subtly co-ordinated with the music that it's a feature they will retain in all Glennie's performances, facilities allowing.

The work – lacking, as Stucky says, any 'argument' or counterpoint – is not traditionally structured. However, one SSO staff member who is not musically trained, caught the continuity that threads it together. It's as if you have to be able to maintain at any one moment a consciousness of what has been and an awareness of what's to come for this piece to work, as it certainly did for me.

However, in terms of effect on the audience, who could hear it only once, one well-known critic was caught off-guard, since, as he put it, *Spirit Voices* is more introspective, segmented, larger in scope, and less lyrical than other works Glennie has been premiering. Next to me, a slightly spacy

woman in her 30s, an untrained concert-goer, didn't applaud at all. And both nights, while the audience greeted Glennie enthusiastically (she's an audience favorite who's even recorded with the orchestra for BIS), they seemed to applaud only tepidly for the work itself. The tepidity puzzled me Friday night, since you could hear a pin drop in the hall, though on Saturday there was plenty of stifled coughs and 'clearing of the phlegm', and not just during that silent finale.

In addition to the instruments already mentioned, the work is scored for marimba, Burmese gong, agogo, and a few pieces of metal that look like large tractor bolts which even Stucky couldn't name. Two instruments were withdrawn during rehearsals, and one, which was not available, Stucky dearly wishes for. He is a man who composes without a computer, only near a piano keyboard, and who can't conceive of harmony apart from orchestral color. While prepared for advice from Glennie and Shui, Stucky said the work has needed no major surgery. Only a few dynamics were tweaked, and tempos remain relatively close to what he imagined.

Glennie absolutely needed to see the entire score to see how her part fit into what Stucky intended, which is another way of saying that the orchestral score is as glittering, delicate, and substantial as the soloist's. As Stucky said, while there's plenty of time when orchestra members are silent, there is no time for any of them not to concentrate. Both Glennie and Shui felt that the open space and wet (vs. dry) acoustics of the Esplanade's Concert Hall were ideal because they allowed time for sounds to travel, amplify, meld, and linger.

Stucky's work was the last of five world premières commissioned for the Singapore Symphony's first season at the Esplanade (their season runs January through December). The others were by Aaron Jay Kernis, Bright Sheng, Zhou Long, and Joyce Koh). The inaugural season also featured the Sounds of Asia Series with works by Chen Pei-Xun, Liu Wen Jin, Phoon Yew Tien, Bernard Tan, and Chen Yi.

By contrast, their 2004 season seems surprisingly tame. There's one world première (by John Sharples), one concert with six Chinese composers during Chinese New Year, a six-day Silk Road Festival with guess who (one concert is with the orchestra), and a Chinese fortune cookie (Chen Gang's *Butterfly Lovers Concerto*). Other 20th-century works are standards by this point in time.

Concerning the Esplanade itself, which has a 2000-seat house built for opera, ballet, musicals with amplification, etc., plus a recital hall and flexible black box theatre, the season is pro-

grammed in advance only about 40%. Management first schedules the annual Chinese, Malay, and Indian festivals. Around them highlights in 2004 include the Hong Kong ballet performing *The Last Emperor* with choreography by Canadian Wayne Ealing and music by Su Cong; a program of new Chinese music; performances by the Singapore Chinese Orchestra, the London Symphony, and the world première of Robert Wilson's *La Galigo*, a Southeast Asian theatre-dance-music-poetry epic that will subsequently tour to Amsterdam, Barcelona, and New York City. During the other 60% of the season, Esplanade management strives to lure everything from community groups to international artists and ensembles that give a cross-current of the performance scene today.

The Esplanade is one of the world's few venues that also contains a shopping mall, arts library, numerous restaurants, and ample space for visual art displayed not behind windows but in open spaces where people can interact with it. As members of management clearly conveyed, they strive to make art a life style rather than a separate entity, with their guiding light being that there's no 'we've got it right' arrogance but rather a flexibility to integrate whatever new comes along, as long as it physically fits into the size and technical givens of the facilities. While they program to attract Singaporeans and the residents of the Malay peninsula rather than tourists, with such an open and creative attitude, visitors will find themselves in one of the major cultural capitals of the world.

Gil French

London, St John's Smith Square: David Matthews's 'A Vision and a Journey'

A Vision and a Journey is David Matthews's op. 60 – a neat coincidence, then, that the first performance of its revised version should be part of the celebrations of his sixtieth birthday. The work is part of a series of imposing orchestral scores Matthews has been composing over the past two decades, beginning with *In the Dark Time* in 1983 and continuing with *Chaconne* in 1985 and *The Music of Dawn* two years later; this one followed in 1993, when it was premièred by Yan Pascal Tortelier and the BBC Philharmonic, but it underwent a thoroughgoing revision between March 1996 and March 1997. I asked the composer before the concert what the revisions had entailed: 'I completely rewrote the whole thing. It's more or less a new work'.

If the title suggests a parallel with Sibelius's *Night Ride and Sunrise*, Matthews's programme note makes the connections explicit – referring to the three orchestral scores which preceded it, he writes: 'I have called these three pieces symphonic poems, maintaining a Sibelian distinction between that title and the symphony (I have also written four of these [five, in fact, but I guess his point is that No. 4 is for chamber orchestra]). *A Vision and a Journey* has, I think, even more of a symphonic character than the others, and so I have called it a symphonic fantasia, again after Sibelius (*Pohjola's Daughter*)'. The music doesn't deny the relationship, either: it has an obvious consanguinity with Sibelius's great nature-paintings in *Tapiola*, *The Oceanides* and those other late, dark masterpieces.

Structurally, Matthews should have called the piece *Visions and a Journey*: the 'visions' are brief passages, three in number, which affect the course of the 'journey' the music takes over its 20-minute duration. It opens with a bright, *scherzando* gesture which swiftly disappears behind an expansive Sibelian landscape, solemn and strong. A series of string solos, rising from the double-bass to the violin, generates a wonderfully sonorous, mournful song in *tutti* strings – Matthews likens it to a 17th-century fantasia – which mounts to a brief climax.

The strings again dominate the dignified fugal passage which follows, where the contrapuntal writing points to the influence of Tippett. Brass and percussion suggest they have angrier things to say, but the threat of conflict recedes, and the music stretches into a luminous *Andante*, with solo oboe and cor anglais lines wheeling over richly detailed orchestral textures. One senses that Matthews is keeping something in reserve, and he now deploys some of the power he has generated – although he never really lets all his dogs off the leash. Heroic brass-writing over *tremolando* strings bring a hint of Korngold, with muscular surges of energy suggesting the same wide-open vistas you find in the music of Roy Harris. A huge climax blasts everything but held string tone from the landscape; there's a flash of colour from the opening *scherzando* material, a wave of excitement suggests our goal is in view and, with a blaze of brass, the piece stops dead – too abruptly, indeed, given the distance covered (Matthews's Fifth Symphony likewise ends a few chords too soon), but that's the only misjudgement in a commanding, rigorously honest score.

A Vision and a Journey confirms David Matthews's standing as one of Britain's most important composers for the orchestra. Hats off,

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then, to the Kensington Symphony Orchestra and its conductor Russell Keable for their endeavour and a fine performance – and shame on the rest of Britain’s orchestral establishment for letting six years of dust gather on the score.

Martin Anderson

Warwick Arts Centre: Julian Anderson’s Symphony

The demise of the Symphony is frequently announced, yet easily refuted by the quality of contemporary works bearing that title. Many recent examples have been written by British composers – Anthony Powers’s Second, James MacMillan’s Third, David Matthews’s Fifth and Peter Maxwell Davies’s Seventh, for example. To this distinguished list must be added Julian Anderson’s Symphony. His four previous orchestral works contain sufficient structural ingenuity and intellectual rigour to make the cogency of his new piece no great surprise, yet it also offers some of Anderson’s most lyrical as well as intricate writing.

Mysterious shivers from vertically bowed strings initiate the Symphony from the edge of inaudibility into a kind of glacial stasis. Ethereal tremolandos achieved by vertical bowing and the gossamer sounds of cotton threaded through piano strings create a fragile Nordic ice sculpture ready to be thawed and moulded. In true symphonic manner, these opening pages contain all the material from which the rest of the work unfolds.

Sonorous bass clarinet, contrabassoon and tuba introduce an important ascending figure. A scherzo breaks in, which culminates in a brass fanfare leading to the slow movement. This is the lyrical heart of the piece. Its intense string melody is reminiscent of the big-hearted main theme of the slow movement of Malcolm Arnold’s Fifth Symphony. Just as Arnold meant what he said, but apologised for his sentimental tune as an ‘emotional cliché’, Anderson disrupts his broadly conceived theme with bursts of a second scherzo which appear between the cracks of the melody, guying it, yet at the same time strengthening it, so that it grows in intensity and resolve.

The final section is a manic whirligig steadily accelerating to the very limit of playability and involving extreme compression of material. There is a last reminder of the opening material from which the whole symphony grew, before a brief concluding *Prestissimo*. The skill of the orchestration is such that the closing fanfare, that makes the loudest noise in the score, involves a mere 12 players.

Just as Prokofiev, in his *Classical Symphony*, imagined the kind of work Haydn might have written had he lived into the 20th Century, it is not perhaps too fanciful to hear, in Julian Anderson’s Symphony, sounds and forms Sibelius could have devised if he were still active today. Links with Finland and its foremost composer are strong: woodwind calls featured in the score are based on the cranes of Finland, the work is dedicated to the CBSO conductor Sakari Oramo and inspired by a painting of a lake unfreezing in early spring by Sibelius’s great friend, the painter Axel Gallen. The single-movement structure and gradual transformations call to mind not only the monumental Seventh Symphony of the Finnish symphonist, but also the ever-accelerating sonata form/scherzo hybrid of his Fifth’s Symphony’s first movement. Mighty thunderclaps signify nodal points in Anderson’s score, functioning the same way as the majestic trombone theme that thrice breasts the sonorous peaks of Sibelius’s Seventh.

A triumph for the composer, the CBSO and Oramo, the Symphony’s world première in Warwick Arts Centre combined a tense, edgy excitement with raw, elemental power. Oramo and the Birmingham players revelled in the score’s exotic colouristic effects, such as detuned piano, flute and clarinet which subtly enriched an extremely wide-ranging palette. In sum, a concise and compelling 18-minute piece, successfully incorporating such diverse elements as jazz and folk, along with microtonal effects and a glorious diatonic melody. Although there are no immediate plans for a cycle, Anderson may yet prove to be one of Britain’s most notable symphonists, following the illustrious example of his great mentors Alexander Goehr and Oliver Knussen.

Paul Conway

London, Queen Elizabeth Hall and Brighton Dome: Big Noise Tour

Big Noise – heard in London on 21 November and repeated at the Dome (Corn Exchange) in Brighton on the 22nd – was a collaboration between the highly idiosyncratic New Music ensembles *Orkest de Volharding* (Holland) and *Icebreaker* (UK). The former was established by the amazingly influential Dutch composer Louis Andriessen: reacting against the elitist music of his youth, he saw the need for a new type of Art-music ensemble which could travel into the streets and play music with a broad appeal. Borrowing from the model of Dutch street bands (the equivalent, perhaps, of the UK’s brass bands), jazz of the 1920s, Minimal music

coming out of America and the European avant-garde, Andriessen created an ensemble and a language with an overt non-elitist agenda.

Modelled initially on Andriessen's second ensemble ('*Hoketus*'), Icebreaker took an even more extreme stance: they played amplified and assertive music, aiming for a communicative and distinctive style created from a seamless fusion of diverse modern vernaculars. For both ensembles, repertoire was carefully chosen to suit political and musical agendas.

Some may have found it surprising, therefore, that the pieces in the Big Noise programme were in many ways uncharacteristic of both ensembles. New works were commissioned from two British and two Dutch composers, yet the 'sound' most in evidence was distinctly of the variety pioneered by Andriessen in the late 1970s and formalized by many in Dutch orchestral music of the 80s and beyond. The distinctly 'classical' bent was reflected in the concert's stiff presentation (complete with orchestral layout and the tradition of giving bouquets to the frontline participants); in many ways, the videos that accompanied each work were the main concession not only to these groups' aesthetics, but also to modernity. It is perhaps a reflection of this that the performances, although mainly of good quality, seemed rather formal and constrained: they lacked the gleeful abandon, the ecstatic energy, that characterizes the two groups at their best.

Yannis Kyriakides' *Lab Fly Dreams* most avoided the 'Dutch' sound, opting instead for the kind of lively and iridescent rhythmic layering (and even closely similar rhythms) of Michael Gordon's 1992 *Yo! Shakespeare* for Icebreaker. It was one of the stronger of the collaborations between composer and video artist – in this case H.C. Gilje – with the music's twitchy rhythms and insectile electronic clicks counterpointed energetically and humorously by the video's itch-inducing colour- and speed-modified close-ups of frantic moths.

Joe Cutler described his *Jack the Diamond's Jamming Station* as 'mostly full-on', but the distinction between mere bombast and the emotional intensity and sheer resolve so ably demonstrated by Papa Andriessen seems to have escaped him on this occasion. The work's jazzy ending may have been intended as a concession to the importance of jazz in the outlooks of both groups, but its success both as a conclusion and as a contribution to an apposite sound-world was dubious. It was not the only point at which the language was unsettlingly outdated (I couldn't help recalling the climaxes of Schoenberg's op. 16 no.4 on frequent occasions); responding, perhaps, to these

anachronisms, the video by Jaap Drupsteen appeared to be based on a kind of *Grand Guignol* with pop-video colour.

The deeply intense and introspective stasis of Diderik Wagenaar's *Pantomima* had considerably more impact. It offered the most keenly heard of all the textures of the programme; taut harmony and tightly-controlled gestures made this a compelling – though by no means broadly popular – experience. The video by Hexstatic, a stately affair of blossoming stone-in-a-pond circular waves, was attractive enough in itself for short periods, but its Mickey Mousing of the salient events in the Wagenaar soon proved irritating and intrusive, and its apparently automated progress was no match for the carefully-crafted subtleties of the music.

The strongest of the evening's collaborations was that between Cornelis de Bondt and Tom Hadley. De Bondt had written for a similar project, *Kaalslag*, in the 1980s, one involving *de Volharding* and *Hoketus*. The new work, *Gli Toccha la Mano*, exhibited many of the same characteristics as *de Deuren Gesloten*, the work written for the earlier event: a deliberately orchestral approach to the combined forces, harmonies hinting at Purcell's, structures of imposing scale and a frequently overwhelmingly powerful passion. De Bondt's ability to combine Minimalist extension with enormous musical complexity is a beguiling paradox. The presence of singer Cristina Zavalloni initially produced an operatic effect which was truly bizarre given the groups involved, but her impressive range of vocal styles soon proved effective in this work of extremes. Hadley's sensitive and starkly-shot video counterpointed de Bondt's music beautifully; the combination was considerably more than the sum of its parts.

John Godfrey

Boston: Gunther Schuller's 'Encounters'

Boston's Symphony Hall is celebrated as one of the finest concert halls in the world. It is generally less well known that Boston also has the smaller and equally fine Jordan Hall, located in the New England Conservatory. A fixture of Boston's musical life, Jordan Hall is also literally the heart of the Conservatory, being the venue not only of visiting celebrity solo and chamber music recitals, but of a multitude of the whole range of the Conservatory's student concert activity.

In celebration of Jordan Hall's centennial in October of 2003, New England Conservatory commissioned a major work from Gunther

Schuller, one of the school's former presidents. Scored for a mammoth orchestra (including two Pianos – one tuned to quarter tones – and littered with such rarely-encountered instruments as bass trumpet, bass oboe, and contrabass clarinet), plus jazz band, vocalists, and three improvising jazz soloists, *Encounters* is in the tradition of Schuller's 'Third Stream' works from the 1950s and 60s, particularly *Conversations*, and those others written for the Modern Jazz Quartet with various 'classical' ensembles. But its scope, in terms of its forces, its length, and its vision, makes all of those works seem to be prefatory sketches. Schuller's Third Stream music was purported to be a fusion of Jazz and Classical Music; in fact, those two streams never really fused, but ran side by side in the same channel. In the earlier pieces this separateness was a function of Schuller's insistence on adopting a 12-tone idiom for his 'classical' music, a language which the jazz players he worked with – all of whom were indisputably among the greatest of their time – were not able to incorporate into their playing style; this made necessary a calculation which kept the styles discrete. *Encounters* also presents its classical and jazz elements in alternation and juxtaposition, but there is more overlap of the styles – accounted for both by the fact that jazz players today have a general greater familiarity with more complex tonal languages, and by a more comprehensive range of organization of material in the non-jazz music.

Encounters is in four continuous movements, tracing a dream-like continuity encompassing a large variety of different textures, ranging from dead still to turbulently chaotic. These follow one after another in a way which, although not following an immediately apparent logic, is always completely convincing. The jazz aspect of the work, represented by a big band and three improvising soloists, threads its way through the argument of the piece, evolving in style from early Duke Ellington to Miles Davis and beyond. The whole work, bristling with a multitude of musical events evoking a whole world of experience, traces a giant arc which is both inherently satisfying and also moving in what it reveals of Schuller's many musical interests and pursuits over the course of his life. and of his tirelessly generous personality. Although there can be no question of 'influences' on a mature master composer, *Encounters* nonetheless bears witness to the two composers who are the closest to Schuller's heart: Ives and Ellington.

The composer conducted the concert which concluded with his new work and which began with the *Melpomene* Overture by one of his predecessors, George Chadwick, which had been

performed on Jordan Hall's inaugural concert. For the performance of *Encounters*, the stage of the hall was full to the brim with the New England Conservatory Philharmonia, consisting of more than 150 devoted players, led by the wonderful jazz soloists, Allan Chase (alto saxophone), Seamus Blake (tenor saxophone), and Dave Ballou (trumpet). Schuller feels, with some justification, that he was truly inspired during the composition of his work; the performers seemed also to have been inspired, both by the occasion and by the music which celebrated it.

Rodney Lister

London, Barbican: Masterprize Final

There's no doubt that Masterprize, the international composition competition with a mission 'to bring music lovers and composers closer together', is a slick and professional operation, with a tremendous outreach. The CD with the six pieces which made it to the final (of some 1,000 entries) was stuck on the front of both *Gramophone* and *Classic FM* magazines, with a joint print-run of around 100,000. The 'gala final' in the Barbican on 30 October, when the London Symphony Orchestra was conducted by Daniel Harding, was broadcast live on Classic FM (which reaches 6.5 million listeners a week), NPR in the States (16 million) and Radio Latvia (you tell me); and NPR also packaged it for their deferred 'Symphony Cast'. These are scarcely believable figures for contemporary classical music: Masterprize is plainly doing an enormous amount of good. Another statistic worth celebrating is that 1,300 children were involved in the associated education project, playing the six works up and down the UK. It's just a pity that most of the music that made it through to the final was so dull, a post-Hollywood syrup of feel-good consonance and glittering over-orchestration – slickly wrapped empty boxes.

The finalists, for the record, were *Les Fleuves engloutis* by Bechara El Khoury (France, b. 1957), *Tango* (in fact, a tango suite) by Arturs Maskats (Latvia, b. 1957), *Einstein's Violin* by Robert Henderson (USA, b. 1948), *You Must Finish Your Journey Alone* by Anton Plate (Germany, b. 1950), the *Symphony No. 6* by Nicolas Bacri (France, b. 1961) and *Rainbow Body* by Christopher Theofanidis (USA, b. 1967). The last-named was the ultimate winner, though only, I suspect, because it harmonized a chant (*Ave Maria, O auctrix vitae*) by Hildegard of Bingen – if you can call bunting a pedal point under something harmo-

nization. *Rainbow Body* opens with tremolo strings that briefly suggest we're about to enjoy a Brucknerian scherzo; instead, a solo cello prattles earnestly until the Hildegard theme is quoted in its entirety by the strings; when the rest of the orchestra takes it up, it might as well be the background score for a spaghetti western or *Ben Hur* sound-alike. Theofanidis throws in bongos, horns bells up, Sibelian string-writing, a touch of Rimsky Korsakov, a fanfare borrowed from Mahler, relinquishing any hope of focus with each twist of his over-scored kaleidoscope. Quite how he managed to walk away with the £25,000 prize beats me. Ted Perry, founder of Hyperion Records, made an early recording of Hildegard, the sales of which (350,000 units, and counting) kept Hyperion buoyant for years, amazing Perry and allowing him to make all sorts of bold repertoire choices. It seems she's not done with the miracle-working yet.

For my ears, the sole score that deserved the prize was Bacri's symphony – for all its brevity, a real symphony with weight and moment, the only work among the six that demanded and rewarded its listeners' attention, generating and deploying a head of violent energy over the course of its twelve minutes. It begins, *Helios* Overture-like, low in the strings, with the horns intoning a hymn above them; the demonic scherzo which then breaks out brought us the first functional counterpoint of the concert. That first explosion is followed by an uneasy calm, with questing instrumental recitatives exploring the path ahead. The tempo quickens again, but the imminent threat of further force is averted by another temporary peace; instead, one senses trouble being prepared in the background, and it now erupts in a boiling orchestral toccata. Energy spent, a dark *Adagio* which shares some genetic material with Sibelius's Fourth Symphony unfolds a tragic, deeply felt elegy. Another anguished toccata erupts, though edgy string recitatives pinion its passion until the energy can no longer be contained and the music rushes to its conclusion.

Bacri's Sixth generally inhabits the bottom of the orchestra, which he flecks with points of light from higher registers – again, he was the only one of the six who didn't leap at the orchestral palette like a sailor hitting port; instead, his skilful handling of sonority meant that, unlike the others, his *tuttis* told. Bacri's general reliance on content rather than colour isn't something one often associates with French composers; indeed, the Sibelian inheritance in his orchestration pointed to parallels with Rautavaara and other Nordic composers, though my innocent ear might also have assumed the work to be from an American

pen. Bacri can take some compensation from the thought that his music has now reached an audience far bigger than ever before; with luck, it might precipitate the wider dissemination of the rest of his *œuvre*.

Martin Anderson

Manchester, RNCM: Robin Holloway's String Quartet, op. 97

The world première of Robin Holloway's String Quartet, given by the Endellion Quartet at the RNCM on 13 October 2003, came in the midst of a number of concerts around the country marking the composer's 60th birthday. (Let us not forget, too, Claridge Press's publication of Holloway's writings, also coinciding with this anniversary.)¹ Clever programming between Haydn's quartet op. 76 no. 4 and Brahms's op. 51 no. 2, enabled one to appreciate Holloway's first essay in this genre in the context (on the one hand) of a composer for whom the string quartet was seemingly an effortless medium, and (on the other) of a composer on whom the quartet tradition weighed heavily. For Holloway too, the string quartet proved problematic, and almost unassailable – his highly biographical programme-note revealed an initial inability to engage with 'this most hallowed of the classic media, with its incomparably rich literature'. This inhibition threatened to stifle work altogether, for it was only a final attempt in August 2003, after three 'sterile years' of trying, that Holloway found a way through the problems the string quartet posed him.

In a pre-concert talk as part of the RNCM's 'Holloway Resonances' festival (which followed three days after this première), Holloway contrasted the increasingly public development of the symphony in the 19th century with the string quartet, which, despite a couple of noteworthy examples, remained – and remains – the 'most innately musical' of the classical media. Little wonder, therefore, that op. 97 is one of Holloway's works that avoids quotation; it is, as far as his (or any) musical language allows, self-sufficient. Unusual too for so fertile a composer, but bound up in the seriousness of the medium, was the decision to restrict the amount of the quartet's material; despite an episodic structure, the resulting argument is particularly taut. Contributing to this tautness is the fact that the structure is projected against the background of three movements


¹ *On Music: Essays and Diversions 1963–2003* by Robin Holloway. A review is planned for a future issue of *Tempo* (Ed.).

(the composer refers to them as sections), which can also be viewed as a single ternary form. Thus the middle section is at once a slow movement and contrasting 'B section', and the last movement a commentary on the first – which, as it accelerates, also serves to recapitulate elements of the second.

The first movement, marked *allegro con molto*, consists of a series of contrasting paragraphs that, Haydnesque, continually re-work the opening material announced by the second violin and pizzicato cello. This particular pairing of instruments begins what seems to be a detailed exploration of the different combinations available within the quartet medium; the exploitation of these combinations contributes to the discursive quality of the opening. The supple linearity and intensity of the writing – performed with conviction by the Endellions – yields roughly halfway through the movement to what at first seemed to be a reprise of the opening theme. However, from this point, the textures become somewhat thicker, and the writing more lyrical: the 'reprise' serves as a point of reference dividing the movement into two, and not as a point of return. The movement dissolves, rather than ends, with a series of *sul ponticello* fragments; these give way (after a bar's silence) to the second movement.

An intriguing inversion of the respective roles of fast and slow music results in the slow second movement functioning as the violent emotional core of the quartet – Holloway describes it as a 'grind'. Formally, it is a march and trio, culminating in a 'climax in Sarabande-rhythm'. The gritty tension of the march, raised to further heights in the grim, muted trio, is only partially released at the end of the movement in a series of radiant chords, one of the most affecting passages in the quartet.

The radical compression of the final movement – it lasts roughly three minutes in a work stretching to over 20 – provides the work with an exhilarating close. It begins with a direct statement of the opening of the quartet (the third and final such statement overall), although it was hard on one hearing to detect if all the strands of the first were recapitulated (I suspect that they are!). Holloway's programme-notes talk of the re-angling of the tonal orientation 'to focus ever again on the home key': to my ears, this was accomplished via extended dominant pedals. The length of this preparation made the eventual short outburst at the end, a traditional cadential gesture and close on a C, all the more surprising. This reflects the overall proportions of the quartet, in



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which the two longer movements build up considerable tension to be resolved in a short space of time. The relative brevity of both the closure and the final movement as a whole might best be understood in the context of the history of the composition of the work: in noting that the biographical details serve 'as a reminder that what was impossible for so long can be resolved so briefly', Holloway seems in effect to be offering an analogy – and explanation – for the structure.

The attendance for both this concert and the subsequent 'Resonances' festival was disappointing, especially as the latter provided one with the rare opportunity to hear works from throughout Holloway's career and for a variety of media. The central concert, in which Martyn Brabbins conducted *Scenes from Schumann*, the Violin Concerto (with Ernst Kovacic as the soloist) and the Second Concerto for Orchestra, was perhaps the highlight, although the Brown Shipley Concert Hall was too small a venue to allow one to cope with the high decibel-level of much of the latter work. If these three works represent Holloway's penchant for quotation, the delightful *Souvenirs de Monsalvat*, wonderfully performed by Kathryn Eves and Ruth Hollick in a late-night concert following the orchestra, and the *Five Haydn Miniatures* (presented alongside *Evening with Angels* by the RNCM New Ensemble on the final night) show Holloway's capacity for stylization. This was taken to further lengths in the Serenade for B flat, in which 'the main spirit is homage to Mozart's works', performed somewhat nervously by RNCM students in a lunchtime concert. In the context of these pieces (the festival also featured music by Holloway for wind and brass bands, as well as the song cycle *Wherever we may be*), the quartet emerges as a particularly serious and heartfelt work. Whether these qualities are enough in the current musical climate to persuade other quartets to take it up (the Endellion quartet performed it again in Cambridge in November 2003; they will give the US première in June 2004) remains to be seen. It would be a pity to have to wait for another anniversary to prompt further performances.

Edward Venn

London, BBC Maida Vale Studios: Justin Connolly's Piano Concerto.

Many of Justin Connolly's works have been premièred and recorded by Nicholas Hodges, whose musicianship provided the inspiration for Connolly's Piano Concerto (2001–2003). The form and character of the piece are influenced by

the ancient idea of the labyrinth, the forces of soloist and orchestra being well suited to the roles of Theseus and the Minotaur, where one protagonist signifies the existence of the other and the distinction between hero and villain is not always apparent. The orchestral forces employed are unexceptional. Brass and percussion are divided into two separate groups to the left and right of the conductor, whilst the first horn player sits apart from his colleagues and is mirrored by a fourth, offstage, horn player.

The archetype of the traditional piano concerto lurks within this score, which divides its one-movement structure into three large sections corresponding to the classical concerto form. Within this division are 14 processes, affiliated to one another by the technique of developing variation, and reflecting the traditional labyrinthine structure of seven concentric tracks, each traversed twice during the ritual, from the entrance to the centre and back again. Connolly extends the idea of grouping variations together – as in Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations*, for example – by making them overlap so that images recur in different contexts.

During the predominantly fast first movement, there are occasional recitative-like passages in which the important horn obbligato and its off-stage surrogate take the role of an unseen mentor, exhorting the soloist to venture further into the labyrinth. The playing in these reflective sections is freer and non-metrical.

In the slow movement, the horn player has an extended cantilena and the solo piano eventually reaches a point where his music and that of the horn coalesce in a moment of mutual recognition and enlightenment. This is the central crux of the work – and the Golden Section of the piece. Its satisfying feeling of inevitability testifies to Connolly's unerring sense of tempo and structure.

The finale, with its steady increase of pace and power, implies a triumphant return to the outside world, strengthened by a new awareness and understanding. It is indebted to jazz, especially the virtuoso technique and physical stamina in the playing of Cecil Taylor, and combines a feeling of release with a convincing pulling together of the concerto's many different strands.

Powerful and eloquent, Justin Connolly's Piano Concerto makes a considerable emotional impact, its thrilling virtuosity always at the service of expressive clarity. It embraces the sort of bold contrasts usually associated with Connolly's music: judicious juxtaposition of stasis and dynamism; confrontational versus symbiotic relationship between soloist and orchestra and a kaleidoscopic handling of short cell-like motifs

contrasted with logical long-term organic development. The concerto also builds on Connolly's previous achievements: the continuous variation structure where a feeling of perpetual transformation is created by overlapping variations extends his concern with this form in the central movement of his organ concerto *Diaphony* (1977). Also, the use of on- and off-stage horns as a kind of subconscious entity develops a technique first used in *Triad IV* (1968), where the use of a tape allowed a flautist to dialogue with a recorded version of his or her own playing.

In the world première performance, Nicholas Hodges grasped the hugely demanding solo part with flair and intuitive understanding based on a long and fruitful association with the composer, whilst the BBC Symphony Orchestra, under the alert direction of David Porcelijn, got to the heart of this complex but closely argued score. I hope this consummately crafted new concerto will initiate a rapprochement between Connolly and orchestral writing – such is the effectiveness of the scoring that one longs for more large-scale works from this technically searching but directly expressive composer.

Paul Conway

Munich: 'Musica Rediviva'

At least one institution of Germany's contemporary music scene looks likely to survive the government's current austerity schemes: Munich's Musica Viva series. The second concert of its 2003–4 season, held in Hercules Hall on 7 November, remained true to the great tradition of this venerable series by treating a packed auditorium to two world premières and the first German performance of a 'modern classic'. Presiding at the rostrum with the Bavarian RSO was Musica Viva's current director Udo Zimmermann, himself a composer of note and an open-minded champion of the pan-European avantgarde. In a talk broadcast in the interval, Zimmermann emphasized the series' new alignment on co-operative ventures with other state broadcasting companies, specifically in France and the Baltic countries. Besides allowing radio orchestras to pool their straitened resources, this tactic also has the highly desirable advantage of giving further hearings to new works after their premières. The size and attentiveness of Zimmermann's audiences suggest that he has found the right tack to steer Musica Viva out of its doldrums of previous decades and through the cost-slashings of the new millennium.

The evening also witnessed the presentation of the Third BMW Composition Prize to Valerio Sannicandro, a 32-year-old Italian composer-conductor whose award-winning *strali* (2002–3) opened the concert. This year's prize called for the use of a solo voice and electronics, both of which accordingly bulked large in Sannicandro's new work. As the Rumanian soprano Monica Jordan sang syllabified fragments from Michelangelo sonnets, a background sampler (operated by Melvyn Poore) fed in pre-recorded excerpts of contemporary pop songs to create what the composer calls a 'double concerto' for two disparate ages and cultural spheres – an idea he attributes to his reading of Umberto Eco's *Lector in fabula*. In the event, the sampler blended seamlessly into the richly varied timbres of the full orchestra, leaving the soprano in the foreground with a full panoply of contemporary vocal techniques. *Strali* thus proves to be less a multi-cultural pastiche than a poised and timbrally luxuriant essay in the tradition of York Höller and Helmut Lachenmann, perhaps with a distant nod to Berio's *Circles*.

Following the interval and the official presentation of the BMW Prize, the audience was confronted with a work of radically different hue: *Exeo, Solo No. 5* (2002), jointly commissioned by Musica Viva and Radio France from the French composer Pascal Dusapin. Viscous, slow-moving, highly abstract, *Exeo* proved to be a sustained exercise in semitone motion and tonal allusion (the composer has referred to its opening section as a 'sort of decelerated, undulating trill'). As the semitone textures congeal into dense *Klangflächen*, isolated instruments flare forth in ever-wider intervals, adding new layers of tension and material as the piece gravitates toward its concluding A-flat minor triad. *Exeo* is said to owe much basic material to its predecessor *Extensio, Solo No. 2*, from which its very title would seem to derive, but spiritually its true forebear is the 'changing chord' of Schoenberg's op. 15, no. 3.

To turn to Anders Eliasson's Symphony No. 3 (1989) is to enter a diametrically opposed musical universe. It is perhaps too convenient to slot Eliasson into the Scandinavian symphonic tradition and claim Sibelius and Petterson as his spiritual godfathers, but there is no mistaking the narrative impetus behind this 'modern classic', the very titles of whose five movements (*Cerca, Solitudine, Fremiti, Lügubre* and *Nebbie*) outline an interior drama. Eliasson's Third Symphony was commissioned and premièred by the noted alto saxophonist John-Edward Kelly, who duly received in return a solo part worthy of a 19th-century virtuoso. Although Zimmermann calls it a 'primus inter pares', the saxophone dominates

the piece in the sheer length and difficulty of its part. Eliasson's music is basically linear in conception; the background textures are always rich and allusive, casting up motifs that 'infect' each other in the time-honoured manner of the narrative symphony and generating a formidable rhythmic momentum that may well bespeak the composer's apprentice years as a jazz musician. The work's rich emotionality left the audience thoroughly impressed, and Kelly, who has made a speciality of this piece over the years, acknowledged his dominant role by playing a solo encore to round off an evening as diverse as it was satisfying.

J. Bradford Robinson

London, Wigmore Hall: Maxwell Davies's new 'Naxos Quartets' (and earlier works on CD)

In a project that will be completed in 2007, Sir Peter Maxwell Davies has been commissioned by the Naxos recording company to write ten string quartets. Large-scale ambitions already realized, the intimacy of chamber music offers an opportunity not only to consolidate but also to probe and quest with the precision of scaled-down forces. It is timely, then, to be reminded that, although it has not been a major preoccupation such as opera, concerto and symphony writing, the quartet form has drawn from him some significant examples evincing an original approach. A recent Metier release usefully gathers together on one disc all Max's works for string quartet prior to the *Naxos* series.² In these persuasive recordings, the members of the Kreutzer Quartet display a keen understanding of the individual character of each piece, the circumstances of its creation and the purpose for which it was intended.

'Quartet Movement', dating from 1952, is a student work, and the earliest published piece in the Maxwell Davies canon. A lone surviving sketch from a larger composition, this feisty fragment is full of interest. Its driving, ostinato-fuelled energy and rich fusion of Medieval, Western classical and Indian musical traditions reveal Max's preoccupations at that time and also presage future stylistic developments.

The starting-point of his String Quartet (1961) was Monteverdi's *Vespers* of 1610, a particularly fruitful stimulus which also resulted in the *Leopardi Fragments* (1961) and the *Sinfonia* for

orchestra (1962). The intensely weaving opening *Adagio* shows the influence of Mahler as much as medieval music. The sequence of ensuing faster sections shed ever-shifting light on the *Adagio*'s material. The Kreutzer Quartet's performance shows they have the measure of this profound, concentrated 12-minute study.

The Two Little Quartets for 'young string quartet' were written in 1980 and 1977 (revised 1987) respectively. The first is in three movements. An elusive meditation for first violin is followed by a scherzo, contrasting a stormy climax and Orcadian calm. The Finale's opening elegy returns to the serene theme of the previous movement, ultimately transformed into a lament. The compact one-movement second quartet is less serious in tone, attaining simplicity with substance. Both of these Little Quartets are adroit compressions of full-scale works, composed for amateurs, but rewarding musicianship of the highest quality, as demonstrated in the Kreutzer's sincere, considered performances.

The world première of Max's latest addition to the repertoire – the *Naxos Quartet* No. 3 – took place in the Wigmore Hall in October 2003. Before the Maggini Quartet (for whom all the *Naxos* quartets have been written) unveiled the new work, the composer addressed the audience, leaving no doubt as to the political dimension of the piece, which was written in March and April 2003. Referring to the US and British invasion of Iraq, he stated that it was a 'privilege' and a 'duty' to comment on 'one of the greatest disasters of our time' and 'the worst foreign policy move this country has made for 100 years' – remarks which elicited hearty applause. Such a passionate expression of belief was reminiscent of the young maverick who wrote such subversive works as *Antechrist*, *Eight Songs for a Mad King* and *Vesalii Icones*. Anger and outrage have boiled over into the quartet, which has the same hot blood coursing through its veins as those electrifying works from the late 1960s.

Anguished unrest characterizes the opening *Allegro* section of the first movement. The material curdles into a pompous and empty military march before ending in wearied resignation. The following movement is a piercing anti-war lament, based on the 'In Nomine' plainsong, and compellingly poignant to a degree that matches the raw intensity Max achieved in his potent *Worldes Blis* from 1969. At one point, the violins take up the open-ended argument left from the close of the first *Naxos Quartet* – there, it dissipated into the stratosphere, whereas here, its descent signals the advent of a wilfully distorted version of the 'In Nomine' theme. The intention behind this

² MAXWELL DAVIES: 'Chamber works 1952 to 1987' – Quartet Movement; Five Pieces for Piano; Sonata for Clarinet and Piano; String Quartet; *Hymnos*; *The Seven Brightnesses*; Little Quartets 1 and 2. Guy Cowley (cl), Ian Pace (pno), Kreutzer Quartet. Metier MSV CD92055.

music is very much 'Not in my name', as the composer made clear in his pre-concert address. The courageous display of open, personal feeling in this shattering movement left the audience both devastated and palpably moved.

The 'Four Inventions and a Hymn' which follow, takes the form of an ironic scherzo, in which the queasy concluding hymn, marked *stucchevole* (cloying), is a direct descendant of the sanctimonious pseudo-religious chants featured in the opera *Resurrection*. In the context of the Iraq invasion, it is not hard to see whose self-righteous sanctimony Max is mocking.

The final 'Fugue' juxtaposes emotionally exhausted passages with violent *fortissimo* thrusts. There is ambiguity in the title of this last movement, which begins with a *Largo* in traditional fugal style, with instruments entering consecutively, but quickly turns in a rout-like *Allegro* flight (from the Italian 'fuga'). The quartet ends accusingly, with empty jabbing chords jolting the music into a soured silence, perhaps the composer's personal reproach to those who choose not to see or hear the truth.

Programmed after so emotionally draining a work, the *Second Naxos Quartet*, finished in

January 2003, risked being an anti-climax to the concert, yet the piece's structural strength and intellectual toughness ensured no such disappointment. The Maggini Quartet tackled both works with the utmost commitment and something approaching missionary zeal: the players seemed convinced these are no ordinary pieces. The imaginative scoring, structural ingenuity and blazing conviction in these quartets are such that it is highly probable they will regularly grace chamber concerts in the future.

An ideal medium for personal expression, the string quartet has inspired Sir Maxwell Davies to produce some of his most emotionally involving and directly expressive utterances. The three *Naxos Quartets* so far composed are amongst the most warmly eloquent and technically impressive recent examples of the genre. The CD release on Naxos of the first and second quartets in Autumn 2004, and the first performance of the fifth together with the UK première of the fourth, at the Wigmore Hall in October 2004, are events to be keenly anticipated.

Paul Conway



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St Albans: 'Messiah Preludes'

The idea of commissioning modern preludes to preface well established pillars of the classical repertoire has apparently been done a few years ago with soft new sounds gracing the air as audiences picnicked as a lead up to performances of Mozart's operas at Glyndebourne. Conversely one hears of *The Departure of the Queen of Sheba*, and other novelties. However, when conductor George Vass, musical director of the Presteigne Festival, commissioned three modern preludes to Handel's *Messiah*, to celebrate his tenth anniversary at the festival (2002), this must qualify as a 'first', and his brainchild. The Presteigne Festival is well known for its commitment to contemporary classical music. This was an ideal opportunity to commission three major British composers, to make their own 21st century 'commentaries' on *Messiah*, using the same instrumental forces available to Handel. As he also directs St Albans Choral Society, they put on the *Messiah* 25 October 2003, at St Albans Cathedral, prefaced by the three new preludes in the presence of two of the composers, Cecilia McDowall and David Matthews, using Orchestra Nova from the Presteigne Festival.

The cathedral acoustics enhanced the performance considerably, with two distant trumpets proclaiming from the gallery high above the altar by the organ loft in Cecilia McDowall's short opening Prelude to Part One, specially written to blend seamlessly with Handel's own orchestral introduction to his oratorio. McDowall used the opening three notes of the initial solo from the countertenor, which are also the same as the opening for the chorus in both 'And he shall purify' and 'O Thou that tellest good tidings' to good effect for the trumpet solos with orchestration.

'I thought the choir were terrific', said Cecilia McDowall after the concert. 'The whole performance had great sense of direction and drive. It all came across with great clarity – the most effective performance (with the new preludes) so far'. I too was actually quite surprised by the high standard achieved by our local St Albans Choral Society, and I'm sure it had a lot to do with the excitement and 'buzz' of being prefaced by three exciting new Preludes by leading living composers, two of whom were present in the audience.

John McCabe's 'Shepherd's Dream', prelude to *Messiah* Part Two, was atmospheric, featuring descending episodes for woodwind, with trumpet themes from within the orchestra, rather than from afar. In his programme notes McCabe writes:

I chose to draw on the opening theme of 'He shall feed his flock', towards the end of Part One of the *Messiah*, and its close relative, the opening theme of 'Behold the Lamb of God' with which Part Two commences, and therefore to write a sort of counterpoint to the Pastoral Symphony of Part One. I made no attempt to emulate Handel's style, feeling in awe of his great artistry and individuality. I did however examine the tonal structure of the work, and attempted to make a link between the B flat area of the end of Part One and the G minor with which Part Two begins.

David Matthews's Prelude to *Messiah* Part Three, a short 15-bar meditation, *Molto Adagio*, ends with trumpet calls from the gallery playing 'fragments from the Hallelujah chorus, in D major, over B flat major/G minor harmonies (keys prominent in Part Two) and an abrupt modulation to B major in preparation for the E major of "I know that my Redeemer Liveth", which opens Part Three', to quote from his programme notes. In conversation after the concert he conveyed the fact that unless the transition from his Prelude to the commencement of Part Three is seamless, the carefully planned modulatory scheme of his prelude can lose impact.

In fact my only criticism of these three carefully constructed, innovative preludes is that for full impact they need perhaps some reinforcement allowing for greater emphasis of the strategic modulatory ideas so that the crucial lead-in chords remain in the ear of discerning members of the audience long enough to connect with their resolution on Handel's immortal harmonies ahead, for which they are but the preface. Perhaps a bit less 'self-effacement' and awe by our modern composers would also help here so that the audience can latch onto something a bit more meaty and less fragmentary. But this was a noteworthy contribution in the quest for performances of '*Messiah* with a difference'.

Jill Barlow

London, Barbican: Vaughan Williams rarities

Film music, often considered a 'Cinderella' art-form, is really more of a 'Sleeping Beauty': to a 'first approximation', its *entire history* exists on films which we are never shown. Prefatory to the 2003 Musicians Benevolent Fund Royal Concert on 4 November, however, the Barbican cinema presented an early-evening resuscitation of no fewer than four long-dormant items connected in some way with Vaughan Williams, two of whose orchestral works were programmed to follow.

The screening began with *London Can Take It!* (1940; dir. Humphrey Jennings and Harry Watt), the

Oscar-nominated 9-minute exercise in ‘docu-ganda’ which (with its script written and spoken by New York-born journalist Quentin Reynolds) was evidently an attempt to interest a resolutely isolationist US population in Britain’s desperate plight. The film is never listed among those scored by Vaughan Williams (whose first accredited cinematic project was Michael Powell’s *49th Parallel* [1941]) – and this screening demonstrated why: the tiny amount of music in it (no more than 25 seconds at the start, and less than 10 seconds at the close) is all ‘lifted’ from the beginning and end of the first *Maestoso alla marcia* in the finale of the *London Symphony*. In the circumstances, I am inclined *not* to impute any particular expressive or symbolic intention to the fact that the overall film-musical structure thus starts with a tune in mixolydian C, and ends with whole-tone ascent to a chord of G major.

Next, it was *The Dim Little Island* (1949; dir. Humphrey Jennings), an 11-minute meditation – on post-war Britain’s past, present and (uncertain) future – whose preoccupations Polonius might have described as ‘historical-social-industrial-natural-musical’; but which in execution merely added a straightforward visual back-drop to some confusingly juxtaposed and inter-cut off-camera musings by four narrators, Vaughan Williams among them. For me at least, this composer’s loving description of British musical life – its wartime renaissance, its various professional and amateur ‘layers’, and its ultimate underpinning by the ‘great tunes’ of folksong – constituted the only worthwhile part of the experience: elsewhere, an insufferable condescension and stifling concern with national unity and purpose often held sway (industrialist John Ormiston’s *Words To The Nation*, for example, included the *pronunciamento* that ‘we need more work from below, and more drive from the top’. And Britain’s future was hopeful, we were told, because ‘we are good sailors’!). As for the score, this too has to be reckoned a qualified disappointment – though one which cannot be passed over so briefly.

For a start, there is what turns out to be the erroneous picture presented by the VW ‘literature’. Michael Kennedy’s catalogue, for example, tells us the following:

The music consisted [*sic*] of a short prelude based on two folk songs, one of which is ‘Pretty Betsy’ and the other ‘The Pride of Kildare’, both from Vaughan Williams’s manuscript collection. A folk singer sings ‘Dives and Lazarus’ unaccompanied, and the statement of the tune from the Five Variants is used as background.³

³ Michael Kennedy, *A Catalogue of the Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams* (2nd ed., Oxford, 1996), p.188.

On the evidence of the present screening, this description requires wholesale revision. First, Kennedy short-changes the most ingenious and imaginative gesture on the soundtrack: the ‘folk singer’ presents merely the *first two lines* of ‘Dives and Lazarus’ – and as these proceed, a splendid piece of sound-editing allows the gradual ‘fading up’ of an *orchestral continuation* of the tune in the form of the corresponding juncture in Vaughan Williams’s *Five Variants of ‘Dives and Lazarus’* (1939). (As it happens, the instrumental entry is some distance away from the singer’s pitch; but you can’t have everything...).

Secondly, at *every other point* in the body of the film, the music is *also* taken from the *Five Variants* – and not all from a ‘statement of the tune’ either: we hear slabs of Variants II and V in addition.

Thirdly, quite what became of ‘Pretty Betsy’ and ‘The Pride of Kildare’ I cannot say; but what the eminently prelude music heard over the ‘titles’ actually presented us with was a fleeting reference to ‘Dives and Lazarus’ in the form of a transposed (from B to E) version of the last, concluding statement of the four-chord ‘signature progression’ of the *Five Variants*⁴ – and, emerging from its final (E major) chord, a twofold presentation of ‘The Bold Young Farmer’, familiar as the tune of the ‘2nd fiddler’ in *Old King Cole* (1923) but heard here in a different arrangement.

Now, if one is correct in suspecting that this arrangement too was drawn from a pre-existing work (and the fact that it featured the only appearance of a *clarinet* in the entire soundtrack certainly encourages this suspicion), then it is the case that the film contains nothing that required the composer to contribute anything other than his *permission*: such basic ‘joinery’ as the score displays could have been done entirely by ‘other parties’ (perhaps the music’s conductor – ‘probably’ John Hollingsworth, according to Kennedy).⁵ If this was in fact the case, then we have perhaps explained three rather remarkable facts: first, that the British Library possesses no manuscript of a score connected with the film; secondly, that Kennedy’s catalogue makes no reference to the existence or whereabouts of such a manuscript; and, thirdly, that the composer is known to have *denied* that he ever composed a score for this film.⁶ Structurally speaking too, the film contains nothing that leads one to suspect the direct

⁴ The progression’s $\hat{5} - \flat\hat{6} - \flat\hat{7} - \hat{5}$ ‘top line’ derives, of course, from the tune’s four highest notes.

⁵ Michael Kennedy, *A Catalogue of the Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams* (2nd ed., Oxford, 1996), p.188.

⁶ See Michael Kennedy, *A Catalogue of the Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams* (2nd ed., Oxford, 1996), pp.188–189, or *Musical Times*, Vol.97, No.1356 (Feb. 1956), 89, and No.1357 (Mar. 1956), 147.

involvement of a great composer: while one notes that its final words ('Who could talk of an end, when we're scarcely at the beginning?') are quite niftily accompanied by the same gesture heard at the very start, the apparent attempt to further reinforce the speaker's optimistic, 'forward-looking' message by engineering a subtly 'open' ending – *via* an overall shift from E to B – is fatally undermined by the fact that *everything* in the body of the film has happened in that same (modal) B. In short, then, one feels that there is quite literally every reason to argue that *The Dim Little Island* should be removed from the roster of 'films scored by Vaughan Williams': so far, it seems to have as little right to be on his work-list as *Brief Encounter* would on Rachmaninov's.

After two such disappointments, it was refreshing indeed to encounter something in which Vaughan Williams's personal involvement was obvious and genuine throughout: Edgar Anstey's 2-minute reel showing VW at Beaconsfield Studios for the recording (January 1956) of his score for *The England of Elizabeth* (composed Autumn 1955). This was, of course, the occasion when – so the story goes – VW's chair tipped backwards off the platform and Anstey, fortunately standing behind, caught him and quite possibly saved his life. Regrettably or not, no such adventure was seen on the film. Instead, we observed the great man listening to his own music; conferring with conductor John Hollingsworth (replacement for an indisposed Muir Mathieson); and turning over a page of score whose authorship was inferable from the size of the ink-blot visible on it. The only unfortunate feature of the clip was that it had not been left 'authentically' silent (or even matched with something from either of the two works drawn from the score being played),⁷ but instead had had a wildly inappropriate segment of the Sixth Symphony's malefic scherzo dubbed onto it: I don't believe I was being over-fastidious in finding it a dislocating experience to have a composer obviously in his mid-80s sitting in a studio *audibly* accompanied by a piece written in his mid-70s and *visibly* in the presence of an orchestra that wasn't playing it and a conductor who never recorded it.

Happily, the 'absent' score was not long in arriving – since the session ended with a rare screening of *The England of Elizabeth* (1957; dir. John Taylor). Combining an informative discussion of the Elizabethan age with an attractively (colour-) photographed survey of the visible, surviving heritage of Tudor England, this award-

winning, 26-minute documentary for the British Transport Commission boasted a splendidly literate script by Gloucestershire novelist John Moore, resonantly delivered by Shakespearean actor Alec Clunes. And there, of course, is the rub: over and over again, continuous music clashed with omnipresent speaker – with the words permitted to triumph by sheer force of 'mixing level' over a score of real interest and attractiveness (and which, like so much of VW's most substantial film music, was written 'apart from' the film, and the footage edited to fit...). Even so, enough was discernible for one to be able to tell that this score was composed in the same creative breath as the Eighth Symphony (1953–55; rev. 1956): besides details of spacing and scoring (including subtle but telling contributions from the vibraphone), that trumpet-and-drum ritornello (with its $\hat{1} - \hat{3} - \hat{\#4} - \hat{5}$ opening shape) could almost have been the 'Galliard of the Sons of the Morning' (from *Job* [1927–30]) refracted through the prism of the new symphony's finale. One might also – in an age of post-modern quotation-compulsion and self-referentiality – draw attention to an example of film-compositional *self-restraint*: the reading from the 'Book of Job' was not accompanied by any 'deeds of narcissism made audible', nor in fact by any music at all; but saw the composer withdraw entirely – so as to allow the ostensible 'Word of God' to be heard in silence.

And so, after a decent pause for reflection and refreshment, it was on to the Barbican's concert hall for the Musicians Benevolent Fund Royal Concert and those VW works – 'two important works', according to the Chairman of the MBF; 'two works ... that have not been performed in public for many years', in the words of the LSO's Managing Director; and at least one of them a work which, after a few early outings, 'lay unpublished and unperformed', as the Chairman of the RVW Society put it.

From which splendidly tantalizing copy one would hardly guess that neither work, strictly speaking, had any business being on the programme. The never-published *Norfolk Rhapsody No.2* (1906) was not even *preserved* properly (the last two pages of the MS are missing) and seems to have been definitively withdrawn in 1914 (when its companion No.1 was heavily revised) – while the 'original version' (1911–13) of the *London Symphony* presents that work in a state that was still two revisions short of a (withdrawn) printing and *three* revisions away (1918, 1920 and 1933) from its final form. Both pieces, of course, were recently made available on CD⁸ – with

⁷ *Three Portraits from "The England of Elizabeth" Suite; Two Shakespeare Sketches from "The England of Elizabeth"*. Both are adaptations for concert use by Muir Mathieson.

⁸ The Symphony on Chandos CHAN 9902 (reviewed in *Tempo* 218, October 2001); the *Rhapsody* on Chandos CHAN 100001.

the *London* recording apparently having been permitted on the understanding that it would be a 'one-off' exhumation; at the present concert (given by the same LSO under the same Richard Hickox) the programme-book gave horrifying notice that this 1913 score – with its defective slow movement (disappointingly short in some places and crushingly long in others), its shipwreck of a finale, and its longer 'epilogue' vitiated by the slow end of the (extended) scherzo – is now 'generally available as an alternative to the revised version'.⁹ Evidently we are also now stuck with the Rhapsody (and its 'replacement' ending provided by Stephen Hogger), in spite of some lumpy orchestration, an uninspired structure, and the fact that its best material found a happier home in the *Six Studies in English Folk Song* (1926).

The paradox must have been apparent to everyone who attended the film screening as well as the concert: mature work that a composer wished to place before the widest imaginable public ends up unknown to all but a tiny number of aficionados sitting in a small cinema – while imperfect, withdrawn scores and unsatisfactory, rejected 'first attempts' are painstakingly restored and resurrected to form the basis of gala events attended by royalty and relayed by radio. World's gone mad.

Mark Doran

London, St John's Smith Square: Malcolm Singer at 50

For a composer to be able to have a fiftieth birthday concert of his own music is an achievement, but to have those works performed with dedication and enthusiasm by a host of different choirs, ensembles and soloists, including many children, students, as well as colleagues, and enjoyed by a capacity crowd, is an even greater tribute. Malcolm Singer's 50th Birthday Concert on 13 October 2003 was just such an occasion, featuring as it did a world première and second performance, in a programme that spanned from an early graduation work to recent choral and instrumental commissions. What emerged was a stylistic thread and aesthetic integrity, a predilection for quasi-minimalist processes, energetic rhythmic polyphony, and a keen sense of expressive shape that gives Singer a unique place in the pantheon of

postmodernism. Above all the works radiated a practical expertise that derives from Singer's experience as an all-round musician. Currently Director of Music at the Yehudi Menuhin School, Surrey, he is an accomplished conductor and teacher who has produced a large oeuvre in almost every genre, including children's music.

The world première was a pithy set of *Four Miniatures* for male choir to poems by Micheline Wandor (librettist for Singer's Cantata *York*), sung with enthusiasm by the Weybridge Male Voice Choir. Quasi-chorale phrases lent humour to the first song, 'Crafty', contrasted by misty evocation in 'A poem for Dawn' and characteristic suggestions of slow motion in 'Hell' before the rapping staccato strands of 'Music will out'. More serious in tone was Singer's Piano Trio, here given its second performance, following the previous week's Wigmore Hall première, by Dimension, for whom it was composed. The central section of this tripartite work is a recomposition of the Scherzo from Singer's 1986 Piano Sonata, a type of *moto perpetuo* in which the piano's boogie-style ostinato forms an insistent backdrop to syncopated stabbing strings sounds. Singer framed this with an eerie Prelude with unusual chord spacings and a racy Epilogue which nevertheless concludes in expansively lyrical mode.

Singer's is a purposeful and original style, often using means of utmost simplicity and restraint to achieve eloquent goals. This was evident in the two solo works performed here, both dedicated to influential mentors and colleagues, Franco Donatoni and Yehudi Menuhin. The Menuhin School student Ellena Hale gave a brilliant account of *Franco's Gone – Gifts of Tones*, a Park Lane commission in 2000 in memory of Franco Donatoni, with whom Singer studied. It is a Ligeti-esque study in quartal harmony, rapidly alternating chords fluttering around contrasting registers with plenty of pregnant silences and a middle section of rippling cascades of notes. The *Elegy* for solo violin was composed for the funeral of Yehudi Menuhin at the Menuhin School, and features a poignant pizzicato repeated D which casts a dirge-like shadow over each melodic phrase. Yet this falling minor scale, appearing in different forms, gradually reaches a peak of intensity, where a quotation from Ernest Bloch's *Avodah*, the first work that composer wrote for Menuhin, injects a soulful yearning before the piece finds its point of rest.

In Singer's larger choral and chamber works it is the rhythmic impetus and energy which are most marked, and especially in the riveting pulsating colours and patterns of the early 1984 *Nonet*. The performance, by an alert young ensemble led by Valeriy Sokolov, was a *tour de force* with the

⁹ My own solution to the problem of how to enjoy the rather fine 'full length' scherzo (with its remarkable 'second trio') without either endangering the successful parts of the wider structure or having to endure the disastrous rest is quite simple: play this 'original version' of the scherzo as a *single movement on its own!*

three groups of three violins, violas and cellos combined and pitted against each other in myriad textures, shimmering cluster chords and peak pitches sustained, sometimes in harmonics, across the ensemble. With its dramatic interjections and novel sonorities, somewhere between buzzing bees and racing cars, relentless textural repetition and evolution from which soloistic gestures take flight, the work is an inspired masterpiece of its medium.

It was especially inspiring to witness the dedication of pupils and teachers in Singer's works for children. Pupils at the Primary St Mary's School, Long Ditton and the Menuhin School played *Fantasia on Yehudi's Theme*, part of a community oriented project. The theme in question is a simple diatonic scale motif, which was subjected to some ingenious transformations by the larger, more advanced group in counterpoint to the open strings of the younger group. The result was a vibrant resonance with a *Riverdance* feel to it. *Songs from Dragons*, settings of poems by Nick Toczek – conducted with flair by Keith Willis, Surrey's 'Head of Culture' – who commissioned the piece in 1997, further affirmed Singer's gift for music and youth. Children from Surrey Arts sang the simple melodies of three songs with gusto, encouraged to a dragonish scream as final flourish.

A witty highlight of the evening was the virtuoso rendition of 'Fugue', a Singer graduation piece from 1974, by four senior faculty members of the Menuhin School – with its self-analysis of fugal form. The performance of *Two Psalms* by the Zemel Choir (which Singer conducted for ten years) rounded off the concert and underscored an important aspect of Singer's style – his deep involvement and exploration of his Jewish heritage in music, evident in several Hebrew settings and works on Jewish topics. Conducted by Benjamin Wolf, the smooth sustained undulating strands of *Psalm 100* contrasted well with the buoyant rhythms of *Psalm 117*, pulsating ostinati combined with smooth lyrical melodies which evolve unpredictably, yet with necessity. It is that evolution which makes Singer's music so fascinating to follow. The concert highlighted the extent to which his works share a uniquely dynamic energy, economy of means and originality of effect, qualities which are constantly renewed and re-explored in each work. It is a process, one hopes, that will continue to evolve in conception and performance through the next half century, and beyond.

Malcolm Miller



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Martyn Brabbins conductor



László Tihanyi

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Music by Gyula Csapó, László Tihanyi, Balázs Horváth
Baldur Brönnimann guest conductor



László Tihanyi

Thursday 17 June - Royal Festival Hall, 6.00pm
Intimate Letters - new music by young composers
Clark Rundell guest conductor
This performance will be repeated at the Bedford Corn Exchange on
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Admission free - no ticket required!

London, Wigmore Hall: Erik Chisholm and Ronald Stevenson

Murray McLachlan's première of Erik Chisholm's Sonata in A minor on 4 January marked the centenary of Chisholm's birth (in Cathcart, outside Glasgow) to the day itself. Chisholm was a considerable force for good while he was busy in Scotland: the first British performances of *Les Troyens*, *Béatrice et Bénédicte* and *Idomeneo*; visits to his 'Active Society for the Propagation of Contemporary Music' in Glasgow from Bartók, Casella, Schmitt, Sorabji (a close friend), Szymanowski and other luminaries. But he could, apparently, be a difficult man, and with his posting to Singapore by ENSA in 1943, to conduct the Singapore Symphony Orchestra, and subsequent nomination to the chair of the music department of the University of Cape Town in 1946, his native land seems to have been content to forget the out-sized personality whom Arnold Bax called 'the most progressive composer that Scotland has produced'.

Chisholm's Sonata in A, *An Riobain Dearg* ('The Red Ribbon'), suggests that some radical re-assessment is required. It was composed in 1939 but considered incomplete until investigation in Cape Town last year by his daughter Morag turned up the missing pages. It turns out to be a major work, almost 40 minutes in length – although all four movements outstay their welcome, a fault I've noticed in some of the few other Chisholm works I've been able to hear. Yet there's an essentiality in this piece which redeems its composer's prolixity. The musical language is dark and intense, sitting halfway between Bartók and Sorabji, its importance as a specifically Scottish piano sonata being its integration of pibroch and Gaelic melody into a concert work: Chisholm was doing in Scotland exactly what Bartók had done in Hungary. The first movement, its opening *acciaccature* instantly owning its debt to the music of the pipes, develops into a proud and fierce fantasy of craggy strength, the sparse harmonies gradually filling out as the music evolves; as with pibroch, too, this is music of constant ornamentation, which gives it an improvisatory, elusive quality. The scherzo, placed second, is a quicksilver Bartókian toccata, superimposing hobgoblin anger over a boogie-woogie bass. The third-movement 'Lament', inspired by the loss of the submarine *Thetis* in June 1939, movingly extends a terse, fragmented right-hand threnody over aqueous chords in the left hand; a powerful, hymnic chordal sequence rises out of swirling textures which return to reclaim their prize in an atmosphere of unashamed, Stygian gloom. The finale dances with defiant humour, again evoking Hebrides and Highlands (and at one

point anticipating *Peter Grimes*); lyrical consolation suffuses one episode, but the grim jollity comes stomping back, ending the work in a mood of triumphant, splenetic optimism.

The other première in McLachlan's programme was of Ronald Stevenson's *Threepenny Sonatina* (his Sonatina No. 5), written in 1987 though intermittently revised until as late as December last year. Stevenson, who will just have turned 76 when this review is published, became a colleague of Chisholm's when he took up an appointment as lecturer in Cape Town in 1963; typically, Chisholm had him playing in the opera orchestra on the evening of his arrival.¹⁰ Stevenson has been one of the most prolific of British composers, and part of what William Walton called, in a letter, 'your obsessive urge to communicate' has taken the form of a creative involvement with the music of composers he admires: van Dieren, Ysaÿe, Bax, Delius, Grainger. F. G. Scott, Kilpinen, Gershwin and many more – there are over 200 such reworkings (transcription, variation, decoration, essentialization) which often blur the boundary between 'composer' and 'arranger'. The *Threepenny Sonatina* is probably one of the wittiest of these scores (though many of the others must contain humour aplenty), opening with a 'contrapuntal cocktail' that combines 'Mack the Knife' with 'Instead of', pulling in also 'Pirate Jenny' and developing what McLachlan's notes called 'a virtuoso etudette based on the diminution of "Mack the Knife"'. A central fughetta muses sadly on part of 'Pirate Jenny'; and the closing section toys with 'Mack' in tango rhythm, adducing the 'Ballad of Immoral Earnings' for further fun. Its six minutes seemed to be over almost as soon as the music had begun, leaving the impression of enormous learning crystallized in a flash of relaxed wit.

The two premières were framed in a taxing programme that paid tribute to Chisholm's enthusiasms – Bartók, Sorabji, Janáček and Busoni (the *Fantasia contrappuntistica*, no less) – though McLachlan showed the same muscular energy at the end of the recital as at the beginning. (Indeed, the Bartók and Busoni could usefully have been less passionately pedalled.) His encores brought two more Chisholm premières: the second and last of the *Eleven Scottish Airs*, the one a thing of fragile beauty, the other bright with the caustic humour that informs the finale of the Sonata, and both confirming his extraordinary ability to pin down the wild music of the hills in a concert setting.

Martin Anderson

¹⁰ See 'Composer in Interview: Ronald Stevenson – a Scot in Emergent Africa' in *Tempo* Vol.57 no.225 (July 2003), pp.23–31 for more on his impressions of Chisholm. (Ed.)

London, Royal Academy of Music: Philippe Hersant

Philippe Hersant (b.1948 in Rome, graduated Paris Conservatoire, studied with André Jolivet), has been working with the French national radio station France-Musique since 1973 and has received many honours as composer in France. In February 2004 Radio France presented a 'retrospective' of his prolific output as well as the première of his Violin Concerto, a Radio France commission. His new opera, *Le Moine Noir*, based on Anton Chekov's story, will be premièred in May 2005.

His 'Vox Gallica' concert at the Royal Academy of Music on 12 November included the UK première of works for small ensemble and also for solo piano, largely impressionistic in a typically French manner but in an entirely 21st-century style. 'I'm often compared to Dutilleux', he told me at the pre-concert talk, and shades of Debussy seem to abound in his works rather than the more abstract, abrasive approach of, for example, Boulez.

Hersant's *Ephémères*, a cycle of 24 pieces for piano, is due to be released on CD. At the RAM concert of this work, five of the pieces received their UK première, giving us a taste of the range of his pianistic style. In 'Dans l'air du soir', where 'the perfume echoes on the evening air', homage to Debussy is unmistakable, with atmospheric overtones and pedal effects, and the ringing of the bell, almost reminiscent of the Angelus. However, Hersant moves swiftly onto short miniatures based on the travel notes of the 17th-century Japanese poet, Basho, with 'the Ant' in cryptic staccato and then 'the Heron', with strident chords. These were all imaginatively portrayed by pianist Anne Lovett.

The main work premièred at the concert was *In Nomine*, scored for one principal cello and six celli, and was inspired by the music of the 16th century English composer John Taverner, and based on the famous 'In Nomine' chant of the Benedictus. This work had an impressive sense of direction, with well-developed melodic flow and rhythmic impetus, and it was particularly well received by the Academy audience. Hersant mentioned to me that he feels something of an affinity to the music of Benjamin Britten, which may well be apparent in his operas, but here I could discern something of the mystical quality of *The Protecting Veil* by the modern day John Tavener, if on a more limited canvas. Hersant's fine definition of melodic line, coupled with his heritage from the French Impressionist School, leads to his works having an accessibility about them, further enhanced by programmatic titles or thematic concepts. Maybe

his experience as a radio producer in France has kept him well in touch with the supply and demand of his public.

Due to the last-minute indisposition of the young conductor, Jean Louis Gosselin, (he broke his hand in an accident a few hours before the concert), the UK première of Hersant's *Lebenslauf* for soprano and instrumental ensemble had to be postponed for a future occasion. Solo cellist Katherine Jenkinson, led the ensemble of celli in *In Nomine*, sans conductor.

Jill Barlow

London, Royal Academy of Music, Pēteris Vasks Piano Quartet

Latvian Independence Day, 18 November (commemorating the day 85 years ago when Latvia proclaimed its independence from Russia), was marked in London by a mini-concert in the Royal Academy of Music: a handful of Romantic songs by Emils Dārziņš delivered in the rich bass voice of Pauls Putniņš and the first UK performance of Pēteris Vasks's Piano Quartet, composed in 2000.

The Vasks, almost 40 minutes in length, is a major addition to the piano-quartet repertoire. Written in an unashamedly melodic style directly descended from Shostakovich, it uses the dramaturgy familiar from other Vasks works: an alternation between the bleakness of this world and another one, an ecstatic, enchanted place where the spirit takes refuge. The Quartet begins with a Preludio that sets up the piano and strings in a Q&A session of gentle heterophony which turns out to be headed towards a suite of folk dances that swing between nostalgia and lusty enthusiasm. The 'Canti drammatici' which constitute the third movement take the form of a further dialogue between piano and strings, an impassioned imploratio. A cello cadenza grows out of a note low on the piano, briefly bringing a *trompe l'oreille* effect of amplification; the viola takes over the cadenza and the violins add echoes of Jewish melisma. The fourth movement, 'Quasi una passacaglia', opens with angry piano writing, leading to rocking harmonics in the strings over folk-like melodic material in the piano, the music growing in volume and confidence until it launches into another fierce folk-dance using repetitive rhythmic fragments *à la* Shostakovich, and with something of his rhetorical manner, too. The ecstasy subsides and a long-held piano chord introduces a 'Canto principale' and we are back in this mournful world again, with another extended cello solo, its sad lyricism taken up by viola and

violin. A gorgeous instrumental song slowly rises to passionate intensity, broken off at the thrilling climax, and wistful phrases in the strings over soft piano chords sing the work to gentle sleep.

The performance was by an *ad hoc* group of young musicians whose commitment and cohesion suggested they had been playing together for

years: Diana Ketler (piano), Remus Azoitei (violin), Razvan Popovici (viola) and Beate Altenburg (cello) – the composer, on hand for the occasion, was obviously delighted. I suspect we'll be hearing both more of them and of Vask's compelling Quartet.

Martin Anderson